



**BEVERLY
RAILEY
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Mouthing off on the state of oral health

COUNT ME AMONG the many baby boomers considering how to supplement post-retirement income. I've been watching coach Rich Rodriguez on TV make condescending and disparaging remarks about "ignornt" West Virginians. An idea blossomed when I heard that he is paying a fortune to support his family, Rita's family, his agents and lawyers.

Poor Rich, he missed an opportunity to further humiliate us by not pointing out an obvious problem here in the Mountain State. He seems to like deals, so how about adding me to his list of people to support!

If he (or his agent) calls, I will give him every joke I've ever heard about toothless, rotten, smelly mouths in the Mountain State. Don't get mad at me; a lot of them come from West Virginians. A local joke is about his native county — although I won't put the name of the town in. "What has three teeth and is a mile long? The line at the ——— Fair."

Maybe selling these pitiful jokes to Rod isn't a good way to earn money, but you get the picture. It isn't a laughing matter, to be sure, that West Virginia has the worst oral health in the nation. Sometimes, Kentucky beats us out for last place, but how good can we feel about being on the bottom of the heap?

New science tells us that people with gum disease are more at risk of heart disease and attacks, strokes, diabetes and, in the case of pregnant women, giving birth to underweight babies. Cavities are bacterial infections, much like the ones that cause strep throat.

This is a complicated issue, to be sure. There are no quick fixes. There is plenty of blame to go around. What can we do?

All county school boards could get gutsy and ban unhealthy sugary drinks and candy sales. About half of the counties in West Virginia have already done this. What is more important than healthy kids?

Parents need to break the cycle if they are from families where losing teeth as you get older is seen as a natural piece of development. Give your kids water to drink; encourage brushing and flossing; and get dental care before they start school. Kids with Medicaid have dental coverage, so use it!

Health-care providers could practice in new ways. Dentists, dental hygienists, doctors and nurses need to be part of the oral health team. WVU could help by updating curricula, expanding outreach and forming a "Volunteer Corps" of dental and medical professionals to increase access to care in schools, free clinics and nursing homes.

Insurers could focus on prevention and quality of care. Incentivize dentists to care for very young children and pregnant women.

It is possible that one day every West Virginian will have a healthy and confident smile. The dental jokes will disappear, but I'm willing to suffer a loss of income from Rod if that happens.

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